



Give us this day our daily bread

BY KELLY VAUGHN PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM FULLER

From left, Sister Victoria and Sister Pam bring Santa Rita Abbey's Holy Communion plate, which holds altar breads made at the abbey, to Father Thomas to celebrate the Eucharist. In the background, Sister Rita serves as the acolyte. Another nun, Sister Esther, crafted the abbey's altar from the trunk of a mesquite.

Each day, the sisters at Santa Rita Abbey wake up early for prayer and Holy Communion. That's followed by a daily routine that includes morning work, reflection, Vespers and evening prayers. One of the sisters, Sister Victoria, was there when the cloister opened near Sonoita in 1972. Today, she's the abbey's prioress. And there's nowhere else she'd rather be.



TOP, LEFT: Sister Cathy (foreground) and other nuns pray and sing hymns during Vespers, one of seven canonical hours celebrated throughout the day. Most of the hymns the nuns sing were written centuries ago.

LEFT: Sister Victoria (left) and Sister Beverly pose for a photo in 1978. Sister Beverly was the abbey's prioress from 1990 to her death in 2000; she is buried at the abbey's cemetery.

ABOVE: Sister Victoria, who now is the abbey's prioress, makes an eggplant dish for the nuns to share. "Her dazzling smile and the light in her eyes haven't diminished an iota," photographer Tim Fuller says.

Sister Victoria called it a desert star flower. And maybe it was. Or maybe it was a daisy desertstar. What it was doesn't really matter. For Sister Victoria, the flower was the second sign that Santa Rita Abbey, near Sonoita, would teach her something deep and spiritual and lovely.

"Our soil here is full of clay," she says. "So, after a rain, the clay mud dries into these incredible patterns — alligator skin mud. One day, I noticed that flower growing in the middle of it. The white flower was backlit by the sun, and all I could think was: *Teach me. Teach me.* In the midst of all that harshness, a beautiful flower emerged. It showed me that circumstances don't have to make you ugly."

What, then, was the first sign?

It occurred shortly after Sister Victoria moved to the Cistercian monastic community when it opened in February 1972. She'd come from a monastery on the East Coast, having volunteered, as a novice nun, to turn her sights and service westward.

Cradled in a valley beneath its eponymous mountain range, Santa Rita Abbey is remote. It is the beneficiary of summer monsoon storms that nourish the property's gardens and surrounding grasslands. In winter, there might be snow. Always,

there is solitude. Quiet.

"I remember making the turn onto [State Route] 83 off of Interstate 10 that first time," Sister Victoria says. "I was so relieved."

Then, she saw a landscape she'd seen before — in a dream. She had even drawn the image from her mind's eye.

That was that first sign. The Santa Ritas and the sky above them had found the sister before she'd ever found them.

EVER SINCE, SISTER VICTORIA — now the abbey's prioress — and the 10 other nuns who share a home there have been committed to a life of quiet, prayerful solitude in the wilderness.

In the May 1978 issue of *Arizona Highways*, contributor Karen Fisher wrote: "The mystery of monastic life here at the abbey is counterbalanced by its very ordinariness. Daytime hours are divided equally among three kinds of activity — study, prayer and *work!* Ideally all work is prayerful. Within the cloister, near-silence increases this opportunity."

The same is true today.

Each day, the sisters wake early for prayer and Holy Communion, followed by meetings and morning work. They make altar breads that help sustain

The abbey, in the foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains, has been enlarged since *Arizona Highways* featured it in 1978. More nuns live and work there, and there is a new sanctuary and bell tower, a large building for making altar bread, a residential wing, and a retreat house.



LEFT: One of the nuns' duties is the reading of sacred texts. Here, Sister Hildgard (left) and Sister Jacqui read in one of three rooms in the library that are used for this purpose.

BELOW: Sister Hildgard, who was born in Kenya, smiles as she sorts recently baked altar bread. The abbey's high-tech oven, made in France, can produce 75,000 hosts per day.

BOTTOM: Sister Clare (left) turns a page as the nuns sing chants during one of the daily canonical hours. "Probably the greatest of the many reasons to visit the abbey is to hear these chants," Fuller says. "Their high voices, honed by years of singing, are lovely beyond belief."



the community financially, as do the sculptures created by Sister Esther, who came to the abbey from the Philippines in 1986. There is time for individual prayer and reflection, an optional siesta, afternoon work, Vespers, evening prayers.

Early to bed. Early to rise.

And, always, there is the wilderness that surrounds them.

As Fisher wrote in 1978: "At midmorning, looking from a hillside opposite the abbey enclosure, it seems nothing moves. The eyes are drawn horizontally across the ridge, then vertically, up the simple, almost austere tower, unmistakably French, rising from the basic, Spanish-influenced construction. The little valley below the ridge is a passageway guarded by long, low hills, the very same hills that hide the road to this place from the outside world."

Although Sister Victoria no longer hikes as many miles as she used to, she often finds herself exploring the long, low hills that surround the abbey's property. There, she finds beauty in two dimensions. "The physical aspect plunges you into God," she says. "And that imparts the spiritual level. You have to develop eyes to really see that there's so much life there. The animals. The insects. The birds.

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

And that's — in part — why the abbey's sisters consider themselves stewards of the land. They've been outspoken against development and mining projects that might threaten the fragile landscape. They grow a garden and scare away predators that might snack on the boundless rabbits that populate the grasslands. Indeed, more than once, one of the sisters has ward off a mountain lion or black bear, all the while respecting that the lions and bears have a home in those foothills as well.

The sisters now invite members of the community to experience the prayerful wilderness, too, by booking a stay in the abbey's retreat house. While the nuns don't provide spiritual counseling during the retreats, they do welcome attendance at their liturgical services.

Because, as Sister Victoria reminds us: "We don't live here just for ourselves. We're connected to God, so we're connected to everyone. We pray for progression in peace, goodness and care." **AH**

Sister Victoria spends a quiet moment at the sculpture of St. Joseph, created by Sister Esther, in the pine grove behind the abbey. The nuns regard St. Joseph as their main protector.

Santa Rita Abbey is located at 14200 E. Fish Canyon Road in Sonoita. For more information or to schedule a retreat, call 520-455-5595 or visit www.santaritaabbey.org.